

# Pony Express

by

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Warren Upson stood in the door of the barn and watched the rain. It poured off the roof, splashed in the puddles and sent streams of water running across the muddy yard. The whole world look grey and miserable, but Warren didn't care. This was the most exciting day of his life. Today was the first ever run of the Pony Express and he was going to be part of it.

Jake, the station keeper, led a grey horse up to the door and looked out at the rain. "Maybe the others are right," he said. "Maybe it is impossible."

"No, it's not," said Warren. "We've got the best horses and the best riders waiting all the way along the trail. You wait and see. We'll get the mail from one side of the country to the other faster than it's ever been done before."

"But first you've got to get across the mountains," said Jake as he adjusted the saddle on the grey's back. "And that's not going to be easy in weather like this."

Warren felt his stomach knot with a mixture of excitement and fear. This was going to be the hardest ride he had ever made - one hundred miles across the Sierra Nevada Mountains with only brief stops to change horses at the relay stations on the way. But Warren was determined to succeed. He wanted to win the Pony Express a place in history.

"He's coming!"

The shout from the yard sent Warren running from the shelter of the barn. Water cascaded from the wide brim of his hat and poured down the oil-skin cape that covered his thick coat. But he was too excited to care about the rain as he watched the approaching horse gallop closer and closer. The rider was bent low over its neck, urging the tired animal forward at top speed.

Jake ran up to Warren with the grey horse saddled and ready to leave. It was eager to be on its way despite the weather and fought Jake's attempts to make it stand still. He held the reins tightly as the horse pranced around him, shaking its head and swishing its tail.

Warren went to help, talking soothingly to the animal and stroking its neck. The grey calmed down for a moment. Then it jumped back in alarm as the approaching horse finally galloped into the yard.

"I'm half an hour early," yelled the rider triumphantly as he pulled his tired horse to a halt. He leapt off, pulled a leather cover from over the saddle and threw it to Warren.

Warren caught it easily and was thrilled to feel it in his hands. For this was the mochila - the leather mail carrier which would be handed from one rider to another right across the country until the letters in its pockets were safely delivered. Now the mochila was in his keeping. Until he handed it to the next rider in Carson City, the success of the Pony Express depended on him.

He tossed the leather cover over the prancing grey's wet saddle and swung himself into place on top of it. Then he waved at Jake and turned the horse's head towards the road. As soon as he pressed his legs against its sides, the grey leapt forward into a gallop and raced away along the muddy road. Its hooves sent splatters of mud in all directions, turning its grey legs brown.

Warren ignored the lashing rain and concentrated on the excitement of the ride. He loved the thrill of galloping so fast and the feeling the power of the horse moving under him. This was the ride he had been waiting for. This was why he had joined the Pony Express.

But he could still feel a hint of fear. Ahead of him the Sierra Nevada Mountains towered into the sky. Their high peaks were white with snow. Jake was right. Crossing the mountains in weather like this was difficult and dangerous. Some people thought it was impossible. Was Warren brave and skilled enough to prove them wrong?

The horse raced on, but it was hard work galloping in the thick mud. Soon flecks of sweat mixed with the rain on its neck, and its first mad rush slowed to a steadier gallop which ate up the miles to the next relay station.

By the time they arrived, the grey was exhausted. Warren leapt off, glad the animal could have a well earned break. But there was no rest for him - he still had many more miles to ride.

There was a fresh horse waiting - a palomino whose golden coat and white mane and tail made a welcome patch of brightness in the gloomy weather. But its handsome appearance was not matched by its personality. It put its ears back and snapped at the empty air as Warren swung first the mochila and then himself onto the horse's back.

Warren didn't care. He had ridden this horse before and knew that its speed more than made up for its bad temper. He urged it forward firmly and the horse obeyed, galloping away without further argument.

The road climbed steadily now, twisting and turning as it followed the route of the American Fork River. There were no other travellers today. The mud was far too thick for a wagon and even the powerful palomino had to slow down to pick its way through, trying to keep to the firmer ground.

The air grew colder as they travelled higher and higher into the mountains. Just before the next relay station, the rain changed to sleet. Snowflakes mingled with the raindrops, settling for a moment on the palomino's neck before they melted. The sight of them made Warren glance nervously up at the peaks. If the weather was this bad down here, what would it be like higher up? Heavy snow could make his route impassable.

He pushed the thought away as they galloped into the yard. He'd face the future when it happened. What mattered now was to change horses as swiftly as possible. Every second counted in the race to make the Pony Express the fastest mail service in America.

But the palomino had different ideas. Although it was tired, it was still bad tempered. It put back its ears, snaked out its neck and sunk its teeth into the shoulder of the horse waiting in the yard.

Its victim squealed with rage, swung round and lashed out with its back legs. To Warren's relief, the two hooves thudded into the palomino's side leaving his leg unharmed. If they'd hit it, they'd have snapped the bone and ended his ride for good.

The kick taught the palomino a much-needed lesson. It stopped biting and stood quietly while Warren moved himself and the mochila to the black horse.

His new mount had a jet black coat and a small white star in the centre of its forehead. It also had so much energy that it bucked playfully as soon as it felt Warren's weight in the saddle. He rode the buck easily, laughing as he leant back to balance himself. Then he pushed the horse

forward quickly and turned its energy towards the job at hand. Soon its powerful muscles were carrying them at full speed towards Strawberry Valley, the next stop on his long ride.

The sleet was horrible. It made the world look even greyer and gloomier than before. The rain beat in Warren's face while the snowflakes landed on his collar and trickled down his neck as they melted.

The black horse carried him as fast as it could up the steep road - higher and higher into the mountains. Gradually the sleet changed from rain with a few snowflakes to snow with a few drops of rain. Then the rain stopped completely and Warren was riding through a whirl of white flakes. The snow lay longer now on the horse's mane before it melted, and the pine trees by the roadside were frosted with white.

By the time the black horse galloped wearily into Strawberry Valley, the relay station was covered with a thin layer of snow. Berry, the station keeper, was waiting with a bay horse saddled and ready to go. Warren was glad to see it was a mustang - born and bred in one of the herds of wild horses which roamed the open country. Its wild ancestry had given it the strength and stamina it would need to get across the High Sierra in this snowstorm.

As Warren pulled the black horse to a halt, a bearded man ran out from the barn and took hold of the bridle. "Well done," he said. "You're making good time."

"Is the road ahead clear?" asked Warren as he leapt off and grabbed the mochila.

The man looked worried and shook his head. "I've had men out with mules trying to keep it clear," he said. "But the weather's dreadful. We've had to give up."

Warren bit his lip anxiously as he tossed the mochila onto the fresh horse. Perhaps it really was impossible. Perhaps he should give up now while he was still safe. Then he thought of all the other riders waiting along the trail. He couldn't let them down.

"I can't stop," he said. "However difficult it is, I've got to find a way through." He swung himself into the saddle and turned the mustang towards the snow covered road. The future of the Pony Express depended on him. He had to make sure the mail reached the other side of the mountains.

The horse set off at a fast gallop. But the road ahead was steeper than ever and the snow grew thicker by the minute. Soon galloping was impossible and even a slow canter was an effort.

The world was white and silent. The only sound was the muffled thud of the horse's hooves on the snow-covered ground. Warren peered through the whirling flakes, anxious not to lose his way. Everything looked so different from when he had ridden this road before to learn the route. A mistake now could leave them lost in this frozen wilderness or send them tumbling down a steep slope into a canyon and certain death.

A chill wind blew up, sending the snowflakes scurrying before it. They stung Warren's face and he pulled the front of his hat down to protect him. He tried to keep his cape over his hands to warm his frozen fingers but the wind lifted it and drove the snow underneath.

The mustang lowered its head and looked away from the force of the wind. White flakes stuck to its mane and the long hairs of its ears. As the snow grew deeper and deeper, the horse slowed to a trot and then to a walk. But it kept on moving forward, battling bravely through the worsening blizzard.

The wind became stronger, picking up the top layer of the lying snow and blowing it sideways with the falling flakes. It blew the snow into drifts that changed the landscape - hiding the road and half burying the smaller trees.

The horse struggled on bravely, lifting its feet high to pull them clear of the snow. Then suddenly it sank belly deep in a drift. There was no way it could get through such deep snow with a man's weight on its back.

Warren jumped off to lighten its load. He wasn't as heavy as the horse so he didn't sink as far. But the snow still reached his knees and spilt into the top of his boots. "Come on, fella." he yelled, as he struggled forward with the reins in his hand.

The horse could move more easily now and tried hard to follow him. It leapt and plunged through the deep snow, fighting its way out of the drift. By the time it was free, they were both panting with effort. Their breath curled like smoke in the cold mountain air.

Warren stroked the horse's head and brushed the ice from its nostrils. It would be good to rest for a while, but he knew they mustn't. They had to deliver the mail, and they needed to keep moving to keep warm. If they went to sleep here in the snow, the cold might kill them both.

The path ahead was so steep and the snow so deep that riding was impossible. So Warren walked, leading the horse behind him. He searched for the easiest route and tried to go round the biggest drifts. But he had to concentrate hard to avoid losing his way. The snow made everything look so different, and the cold was numbing both his body and his mind.

They trudged on through the blizzard and the biting cold, climbing higher and higher into the mountains. Warren walked in front with his head down against the wind. He crossed his arms against his chest and tucked his hands into his armpits in an attempt to warm his frozen fingers.

The horse followed close behind, treading in the path that Warren had broken through the snow. It looked cold and miserable with its head low to protect it from the wind. A layer of snow lay along its back, and the saddle was completely covered.

Their progress was slow. Warren knew they were sliding behind schedule and tried to force his tired legs to move more quickly. But it was impossible to go any faster on the steep snow-covered slope. All he could do was concentrate on keeping going - on making sure the mail reached the other side of the mountains safely.

Suddenly Warren's foot caught on a hidden rock. He tripped and landed face down in a drift with the breath knocked out of him. As he lay there, the icy fingers of the snow wrapped themselves round his tired body and he felt a sudden wave of despair. The climb ahead was too difficult. It would be so much easier to give up now and surrender to the cold.

Suddenly he heard a gentle whicker and felt something warm push at his neck. He turned his head and saw the mustang's nose close to his. The horse's breath warmed his face, chasing away the numbness and despair.

He struggled to his feet and stood there for a moment, stroking the horse's face. "Thanks, fella," he said. "There's no way I could do this on my own but maybe we'll manage it together."

They set off again, plodding wearily through the snow. It felt as if this part of the journey was endless - that they would have to keep climbing forever. But eventually the end did come. They struggled up the last steep stretch and reached the top of the pass. Warren stopped and looked around. When the weather was good, he could see for miles from here. But today the falling snow hid everything more than a few metres away.

It was possible to ride again now the long, hard climb was over. He brushed the snow from the saddle and remounted. The mustang seemed to

sense that the worst of the journey was over. It shook its head, sending a shower of white flakes from its mane. Then it plunged forward through the snow.

The wind was not so strong now. It was still snowing heavily but the snow no longer blew into Warren's face and stung his cheeks. The road was easier too, now that it was going gently downhill. In some places, the pine trees beside it grew so close together that their branches touched. Elsewhere, the road ran beside a steep drop to the valley below.

At last they rounded a bend and saw Hope Valley Relay Station ahead of them. The drifts piled against the side wall of the cabin reached nearly to the windows. A trickle of smoke came from the chimney and Warren fancied he could smell a faint scent of coffee.

The mustang found a fresh burst of energy to speed its steps towards food and a warm stable. Warren longed to go inside too and warm his cold, aching body by the stove. But he knew he couldn't rest yet. The Pony Express was still depending on him. He had to keep going until he reached Carson City and handed the mail to the next rider.

The station keeper waved a welcome and led a chestnut horse from the shelter of the barn. Warren slid down from the tired mustang which had carried him so bravely over the mountain. He grabbed the mochila from the saddle and stroked the animal's wet, brown neck. "Well done," he said. "I owe you a lot."

Then he jumped onto the chestnut that was fresh and full of energy. It plunged eagerly through the snow with its ears pricked forward and its eyes alert for imaginary monsters among the trees. It bounced sideways playfully when a bird flew across their path and snorted suspiciously at the sound of snow sliding off a nearby branch.

Soon Warren and the horse were alone in the white world with the warm fire and welcome of Hope Valley far behind them. The worst of the blizzard was over now. The wind had died to almost nothing and there were only a few small flakes drifting slowly down. Warren started to enjoy the ride again - the crisp beauty of the freshly fallen snow and the warm smell of horse in the cold air.

As they went further and further down the mountain, there was less snow on the ground and they could travel faster. The chestnut started to trot, then canter and finally to gallop.

By the time they pounded into the relay station at Woodfords, the air was warmer and the snow in the yard was soft and slushy. Warren changed to yet another fresh horse. It was a grey again but this one had one blue eye and one brown. It certainly wasn't the most beautiful animal in the world, but it was fast and powerful and that was all that mattered.

Warren was glad of its speed. The blizzard had slowed him down. He had taken much longer to cross the mountains than he was supposed to. He needed to make up some of that lost time or the mail would be late.

The grey galloped at full speed down the road into the valley. Soon the lightly-falling snow changed to rain and the world became a mix of browns and greens instead of white. The horse's hooves splattered through the mud, sending splashes in all directions.

They were both nearly exhausted by the time they reached the relay station at Genoa. Warren climbed off wearily. His shoulders slumped with tiredness and his whole body ached from the effort of the journey. He had to summon the last of his strength to fling the mochila onto the fresh horse and heave himself into the saddle. Thank goodness this was the last horse he would ride today.

The grey had been fast but this new brown mare was even faster. Its long legs covered the ground easily as it galloped on for mile after mile. Warren was delighted they were making up the time he had lost in the blizzard. But he was also exhausted. He had to struggle to keep awake and make his tired body stay in the saddle.

As they raced into Carson City, Warren's excitement made him forget his tiredness. He waved his hat in the air and whooped with delight as the mare galloped down the main street. This was his final destination. His hundred mile ride was nearly over and, considering how bad the weather had been, he was amazingly close to the right time.

Warren tossed the mochila to the next rider and watched him gallop away. The mail was on the next stage of its journey across America. Now at last, he could stop and rest.

He was wet and tired but he had done what so many people thought was impossible. With the help of the mustang and the other horses, he had carried the mail over the Sierra Nevada Mountains in a blizzard and delivered it safely on the other side.

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*Warren and the other riders successfully carried the mail from Sacramento in California to St Joseph in Missouri - a distance of almost 2000 miles. The whole journey took 10 days - less than half the time it took by stagecoach - and it earned The Pony Express its place in history. The service continued to run in both directions for the next 18 months, but it stopped when the telegraph line across America was finished.*

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